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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BUCHAREST 000843

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EUR/NCE - WSILKWORTH AND CA/OCS/ACS-SSCHMIERER
NSC FOR DAMON WILSON

SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: AVIAN INFLUENZA OUTBREAK UNFOLDS

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D) BUCHAREST 310; E) BUCHAREST 79; F) 05 BUCHAREST 2302; G)
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2185; J) 05 BUCHAREST 2177, K) 05 BUCHAREST 2152

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SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) On May 18, authorities stepped up their effort to contain the H5N1 avian influenza (AI) outbreak in southern Transylvania, restricting traffic and establishing disinfection checkpoints on the DN 1 highway. The virus has also been identified in the bird population within the city limits of Brasov, the region's largest city at 285,000 residents. The number of suspected cases of human AI has risen to 11, though the six earlier cases (reported reftel A) have tested negative to initial screening.

AI ENTERS METROPOLIS

¶2. (SBU) Authorities announced the presence of AI in poultry within the city limits of Brasov. While initial press reports indicated infected chickens at the heart of the city, the National Veterinary Authority informed the Embassy that the case in question is on the outskirts of the city at Brasov-Stupini. Officials have culled backyard birds in the area and imposed quarantine conditions. Another reported case in Ploiesti, a city of 233,000 between Bucharest and Brasov, has yet to be confirmed.

¶3. (SBU) The DN1 highway, a major thoroughfare connecting Bucharest to Transylvania and Hungary, passes through Brasov, and authorities are concerned with the economic effects should a wider outbreak in the city necessitate a strict quarantine. The Ministry of Transportation has re-routed traffic on the DN1 between Sibiu and Brasov to secondary highways to avoid Fagaras and other affected villages and increased the number of disinfection stations. Road transportation on Romania's already-overburdened highways can be expected to slow considerably.

PRELIMINARY TESTS NEGATIVE ON HUMAN CASES

¶4. (U) The number of cases of suspected human AI has increased to 11, though the initial six cases have tested negative for H5N1. Minister of Health Eugen Nicolaescu announced that results will not be available for the five new cases from the affected region until May 20, though

health officials believe they will also prove negative. All human cases of suspected AI throughout the country are required to be brought to the Matei Bals Institute for Infectious Disease in Bucharest, according to the GOR's AI response plan. The Ministry is stepping up its public education campaign on proper handling of poultry and poultry products. According to Nicolaescu, the Ministry has distributed 30,000 units of Tamiflu since the first case appeared last October, and has a remaining stock of 70,000. The Ministry plans a tender for an additional 300,000 units.

REPERCUSSIONS BEGIN

15. (U) Police in Brasov County have arrested three officials from the Drakom Silva poultry farm and one from another farm in Codlea, believed to be the epicenter of the recent outbreak. Drakom Silva's owner and chief veterinarian were arrested on May 17 along with the owner of the other farm. Drakom Silva's manager was arrested today. The four will be held in initial 29 day preventative custody while authorities investigate the extent of the farms' malfeasance. The arrest warrant stated that they are under suspicion of possessing diseased animals and tax evasion.

COMMENT

16. (SBU) The ramifications of the recent AI outbreak continue to unfold. While authorities believe they have confiscated nearly the entire production of the three suspected poultry farms from the beginning of May, some 340 tons, the damage has been done for the poultry industry. Consumption has dropped 80 percent, and will not likely return to normal anytime soon. The outbreak in Brasov has forced the GOR to consider the serious consequences it may face should a metropolis of this size require complete quarantine. Post will continue to monitor the situation and report major updates.

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